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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 001675

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: THE RISING USE OF PARAMILITARY
AND NON-TRADITIONAL FORCES

REF: A. BANGKOK 01572 (SECTARIAN PASSIONS RISING)
[1](#)B. IIR 6 895 0136 06 (IRREGULAR RANGER UNITS)
[1](#)C. 05 BANGKOK 2837 (QUEEN'S SPEECH)

Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Sutton. Reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. With the potential for sectarian strife in the deep South increasing, both RTG leaders and private citizens in the South are working to boost security through the expansion of non-traditional security units ranging from irregular paramilitaries to private militias. While increased manpower may boost security in some areas in the short term, the use of these poorly trained and managed units--which are overwhelmingly Buddhist--could lead to human-rights abuses and even worse government relations with the Muslim majority in the South. Indeed, while many South-watchers give credit to the security forces for avoiding overly harsh government crackdowns like those that occurred in 2004-5, many are concerned that the proliferation of loosely controlled groups of armed Buddhists in the South could result in even more violence. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Following the 14 March (ref A) series of attacks in the deep South that drew nationwide attention, Council on National Security (CNS) and Royal Thai Army (RTA) chief GEN Sonthi Boonyaratglin traveled to the troubled provinces on March 19. After meeting with local leaders, GEN Sonthi told reporters that the RTG is considering expanding the use of curfews (currently in place in two Yala districts) and reiterated his August 2006 call for an additional 30 "Ranger" companies to be trained and deployed to the troubled South. These forces--each Ranger company consists of approximately 76 Rangers, 14 regular Army non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and a handful of regular Army officers--would augment the 30-40,000 soldiers and police currently operating among the 1.8 million residents of the South.

[1](#)3. (C) The 14 March attacks--and a subsequent attack on workers at a Royal project on March 19--prompted an expression of concern from the palace. In a speech over the weekend, an aide to Queen Sirikit explained that the Queen is "deeply concerned" about the violence in the South and does not want to see any more innocent civilians--whether Buddhist or Muslim--killed. According to this aide, the Queen has vowed to do what ever it takes to help protect local residents. (Note: the Queen has provided funding for self-defense training and even weapons to villagers in the South, and we expect these efforts to increase. End Note.) In late 2004 and early 2005, the Queen delivered remarks

(ref C) that were widely interpreted as calls to action to defend Buddhists in the South.

WHEN IS A RANGER NOT A RANGER?

14. (C) While often confused in press reports with Thai Special Forces (similar to the U.S. Army Rangers), Thai "Rangers" or Thahaan Praan, are irregular paramilitary forces led by regular Army NCOs and officers (see ref B for DAO reporting on the structure and training for Ranger units). Rangers are often former conscripts who are given rudimentary refresher training, light weapons and distinctive uniforms, and deployed subordinate to regular Army units in trouble areas, such as the Burma border. There are approximately ten Ranger companies currently operating in the South, but Jane's Intelligence's Anthony Davis says that the RTA does not have a clear mission for them. As he put it, the regular Army troops are too scared to patrol in most areas, "what are the Rangers going to do?"

15. (C) The Rangers have a poor reputation. Many enlist due to lack of employment opportunities or the threat of jail time--a western contact who has worked with them on the Burma border calls them "criminals in uniform." Given the brevity of their training and uneven oversight by regular Army officers, discipline is often a problem. In an incident that Malay-Muslim contacts still cite, a Ranger stopped a young Malay-Muslim male from a prominent family at a roadblock in

BANGKOK 00001675 002 OF 003

the South in 2004. Heated words were exchanged, which prompted the Ranger to knock the Malay-Muslim man to the ground, place his Army boot on the young man's head and shoot him at point blank range, killing him. Malay-Muslim contacts refer to this incident as a perfect illustration of the attitude and actions of the predominantly Buddhist security forces in the South.

16. (C) In fact, Malay-Muslims in the South have protested the placement of Rangers near their villages--most recently on March 20 in Saba Yoi, the site of recent sectarian tensions--claiming that Rangers have been behind attacks on Malay-Muslims at night. While Army spokesmen have extolled the use of locally recruited Rangers as force multipliers for regular Army units--claiming "they know the area"--few recruits appear to be Malay-Muslims. As Davis told us recently, the Rangers are often rural Buddhists from the Northeast who want to crack Muslim heads, or Buddhists from the deep South who want revenge for personal losses. In a local press report on the new Ranger companies last year, one local recruit--whose uncle and nephew were injured by militants--was quoted as saying, "I was born here and grew up here. I must live here. I won't run away but will fight."

17. (C) Human Rights Watch's Sunai Phasuk (protect) told us that he is worried about the potential for abuses by the Rangers. According to Sunai, he trusts that regular Army commanders in the South will refrain from harsh tactics, but their control over the Rangers is weak. Indeed, Sunai says that he has already heard unconfirmed reports of Ranger units abusing locals in a recent raid on a religious school.

THE VILLAGE SCOUTS

18. (C) While Ranger units are already active in the deep South, we have yet to see the use of the volunteer "Village Scouts" there. The Village Scouts are a national, all-volunteer, civilian, ultra-nationalist Buddhist organization that played a major role in the counter-communist campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, Village Scouts were involved in a number of human rights abuses, including the infamous massacre of leftist students in Bangkok in October 1976. South-watchers have been concerned for some time that the Scouts would become involved

in the fight against the separatists. In April 2005, Queen Sirikit--who is the honorary leader and patron of the group--told Scouts in a nationally televised speech to "pay attention to the South" and take their pledge to defend the country seriously. While the Scouts have not yet played a role in the southern violence, the recent spate of high-profile attacks may finally inspire them to get involved, with nasty consequences. On March 19, an estimated 2,000 Scouts marched in Bangkok, calling for peace in the South. Chulalongkorn Professor--and adviser to the Army--Panitan Wattanayakorn warned in February that the mobilization of Buddhist defense groups like the Village Scouts could lead to "civil war."

PRIVATE MILITIAS

19. (C) Specific numbers are hard to come by, but press reporting and our contacts suggest that some villages are organizing private defense forces--sometimes using weapons provided by the Ministry of Interior. (Note: the International Herald Tribune ran a front page story on this issue on March 20. End Note.) Given the climate of fear in the South, which has driven many villages to turn inward and bar outsiders, in hope of avoiding involvement in the conflict, the creation of such forces would be the next step. While the effectiveness of these units in keeping the peace is questionable--previous attempts to arm and organize "village defense volunteers" has led to the assassination of some volunteers and the coordinated theft of their weapons--the expansion of these forces increases the prospect for retaliatory clashes between individual villages.

BANGKOK 00001675 003 OF 003

COMMENT

110. (C) It is only natural for local villagers to try and arm themselves in defense against the violence that is gripping the South, given that RTG security officials have been unable to roll back the "climate of fear" and provide security for them. The proliferation of armed groups under only nominal government control in a violent region simmering with separatist passions is cause for strong concern, however. Even more disheartening is the RTG's apparent focus on expanding the number of paramilitary Rangers in the South. According to Anthony Davis, when he recently pressed an RTA officer on the thinking behind this plan, the RTA official admitted that using Rangers was "cheaper" than recruiting new regular units and redeploying regular Army units from other regions was a non-starter. As Davis put it, isn't the South important enough to justify the cost?

BOYCE